

Into the Vietnamese Kitchen

(Hoover Institute collection)

Andrea Nguyen: You know, I wanted to mention, um, I have a website, VietWorldKitchen. com, and I actually have phonetics for common Vietnamese ingredients. So if you're interested in pronouncing some of these things, um, and also, um, in terms of how to say, uh, the recipe names in Vietnamese, or how to pronounce them for, you know, when you're at a restaurant or something, go to the website, um, and if you can't find it, email me and I'll point you where to go.

But the thing is, that's really cool is if you go to a Vietnamese restaurant and you say something in Vietnamese, you will win friends very quickly. And, um, because Vietnamese folks always have this impression, Oh, well, you know, the non-Vietnamese people don't like Vietnamese food.

They don't like fish sauce because it's stinky. Even when I buy, I go to an Asian grocery store and there's a Vietnamese cashier and I'm with my husband, um, who, by the way, squeezed all of the cucumber and carrots for you this evening. And he's in the back working. Maybe he'll come out at a certain point.

Um, but anyway, so he's with me a lot of times and I go shopping. And the cashier, and I'll speak to the cashier in Vietnamese and she'll say, Does he like fish sauce? And I said, yes, he loves it. In fact, he made me buy the green papaya so that we can make, you know, the green papaya salad. And I can tell that it warms their hearts so much that there is this acceptance for ingredients that, frankly, when the French were in Vietnam, looked down upon.

So there is this certain, you know, self deprecation. But, so if you were to go into a Vietnamese restaurant—oh, there he is. So he enters. It's my husband, Rory!

[Applause]

And he's been back there. He, he, he helps me out a lot at events like these by coordinating, you know, um, putting the food together and making sure that, that you all get the tastings and everything.

Question from Audience: So, um, Well, I've been told that phở and phá mean very different things.

Andrea Nguyen: Um, Yes, well, it's phở for the noodle soup, and um, phá means to ruin. Is that what you're thinking? Or to, to...

Question from audience: One I thought meant hooker, and the other was the noodle soup.

Andrea Nguyen: Oh! Well, there's a word in Vietnamese, the word dish. Um, đĩa. But if you say điếm, that means prostitute. So [laughs] so yeah.

Question from audience: What's the web address again, please? Yeah, web. Web address?

Andrea Nguyen: Oh, it's vietworldkitchen.com. The reason why I use the term Viet in the cookbook so often is that that's what we call ourselves: Viet people.

And it's a term that goes back to around the second century BC when there was the Viet people who who existed and, um, And Vietnam is really like Southern Viet. Nam is the, the, um, sort of the Cantonese, or nán, in Mandarin means southern. And so, but we're always the Viet people, and we call ourselves Viet, and we say that our language is Viet.

Vietnam is actually some, uh, a term that was, um, came into existence around the, um, around the early 1800s, when the country was actually unified into a single whole. And the Vietnamese people wanted to call themselves Nam Viet. Nam Viet was a kingdom, sort of like this, this renegade kingdom, um, um, around the 5th century B.C. that, that did not regard the Chinese. And so, um, they wanted to always, in times of independence, the Vietnamese people wanted to call themselves Nam Viet, Southern Viet, but the Chinese would always want to come back when they were in control and call us Annam: Peaceful South.

Audience: Mmm.

Andrea Nguyen: Mmm! So then when the Vietnamese formed their country in 1802, they went to the Chinese and said, we want to call ourselves Nam Viet.

And the Chinese said, no! You're going to be called Vietnam because we're going to screw you over (yes!) one more time. So, so that's why, you know, I, I, I have this little explanation. I had to justify it to my editor because he said this isn't in Oxford English Dictionary. And I said, but I want to use the word Viet in the book.

And I explained it to him and he said: Okay. So, there you go. There was a question back there, yes.

Question from audience: Did you ever find a [?] source for fresh rice noodles?

Andrea Nguyen: Yes. Yes. If you, um, go to, you know, even if you're at 99 Ranch Market, or, um, I think maybe even some of the markets, um, in the Tenderloin and Larkin there, you'll find like these, in the refrigerated section, bags of phở. Uh, noodles. And they'll look all kind of gnarly in like these bulbs, bunches like this.

And so, if you want to make really wonderful phở, yes, you know, use those rice noodles. And, you know, the fresh rice noodles that Vietnamese people use are very similar to the Cantonese fun noodles. Like what you would use for chow fun noodles. And this, I, I'll just tell you. Okay, so you're supposed to refrigerate all that stuff, right?

Well, at a lot of the Asian markets in the Bay Area, and also in, actually in California in general, they put it, they don't put it in the refrigerator case, because once that you refrigerate the noodles, they become really hard. So they'll keep them, like, sort of close, but they won't put them into the refrigerator case.

And that's when they're really good. When you, like, poke on them and they're soft and resilient. Take that tray home and use them. You can keep them out for about a day or two, especially here in Northern California where we don't, where the air temperature tends to be a little cooler. You can keep them out for a day or two, and then just use them up. But, um, yeah. Yes.

Question from audience: Um, what were the four ingredients in your salad dressing, and were they all equal parts?

Andrea Nguyen: Um, let me see. Okay. One quarter cup of lime juice. Um, like three and a half tablespoons of sugar, like white sugar. Three tablespoons of fish sauce and two tablespoons of water.

Question from audience: Could you say that again?

Andrea Nguyen: Yes. If I'm wrong, look in the book, okay? [Laughter from audience] Okay. Quarter cup of lime juice and three and a half tablespoons of sugar, three tablespoons of fish sauce, two tablespoons of water. Yeah. And like

one to two chilies. Don't forget the chilies. Thai chilis or serranos are okay. We have one more question. Did you ask a question already? Alright.

Question from audience: [?]

Andrea Nguyen: Oh, you know, um, you can just go to, you know what's really good is, um, in Berkeley, there's a Tokyo fish market.

On San Pablo, right?

Question from audience: Near Gilman.

Andrea Nguyen: Near Gilman. That's, or you can go to like Mitsuwa or something like that. Or Kame um, on Clement may have these knives. But I would trust the Tokyo fish market. They really know their stuff about knives. Yes, last, last question.

Question from audience: Your fish sauce, oyster sauce... What is this exactly?

Andrea Nguyen: What is it? Right, okay. Fish sauce. What it is, is um, primarily little anchovies and there are particular kind of anchovies that live off of, in the waters of Vietnam that are white colored and they're called cá cơm and they're, they're kind of like, think of it like white bait, okay. And they're about the size of my finger.

And you get a lot of them from the waters, particularly off of the island of Phú Quốc, which is near, um, uh, sort of like in the Gulf of Thailand area. And that's where the best fish sauce is. And so they would catch a bunch of fish, and you could use large fish like mackerel, or you can shrimp, or squid, but these little anchovies are the best.

So then you put them, traditionally, um, if you and I were to be making this stuff at home, this would be the same as if we were making on, on industrial levels. We would have like a cement, um, or a big container or even a barrel, and we would layer it with fish, salt, fish, salt, fish, salt, weigh it down, set it out in the sun, and it goes through a process of decomposing, and it's fermentation, it's um, it, it boils down to amino acids and vitamin Bs, and um, it's a very rich, rich intensely flavored liquid. And in the past, like during my parents time, like, you know, the 50s and 60s and before that, that people would use the first pressing, sort of like, you know, uh, extra virgin olive oil to flavor their food with. It was really oily and it was very, um, nutritious for them when they only had rice, let's

say, and fish sauce to eat and maybe some tofu and sweet potatoes and, and water spinach and the like.

But nowadays it's blended. So what we see in the bottles is actually a blending of, and these premium fish sauce bottles, you know, they're not very pricey. They're under three dollars a piece. And you can use it for a long time. But it's blended first pressing of what comes out of the vat. And then they'll, you know, they'll mix it with a little sugar sometimes, and they'll dilute it with water.

Um, to just get a nice balanced flavor. So, if, and when you look at the color, it should be amber. It shouldn't really have any kind of red, it shouldn't be overly red colored. If there is an overly red coloring, then it's most likely there's been some, like, artificial stuff put into it. And if you have any other questions, certainly, by all means, ask me afterwards.

Thank you so very much.

Emcee: Thank you, Andrea. I wanted to ask one quick question that might be of interest to you. One last question. What are some of your favorite Vietnamese restaurants in the Bay Area? And, afterwards, people are welcome to come up here and...

Andrea Nguyen: And, um, and take a look and take a look, you know, and taste things or smell things, you know, touch things.

It's, it's, this is the sensory-perception part of the evening.

Emcee: And she will be autographing books right outside. So your favorite Vietnamese restaurants you like, other than your kitchen?

Andrea Nguyen: Other than my kitchen, like I in Southern, in, in the southern part of San Jose, there's a place called Phở Bằg that I go to for a bowl of phở, phở a lot of times.

Uh, Slanted Door is great for the view, um, and. Gosh, you guys. And there's a little place on Clement that I just saw the other day called the Little Vietnam Cafe. It's like off of Clement on 6th or 7th Street, and it looks quite promising.

Emcee: Thank you all for joining us.